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ABSTRACT

This paper describes writing as an exploration through unknown terrain by which student writers find out what they are really thinking. It offers teachers the following ground rules to help the difficult process whenever their students are writing in any subject: (1) do not ask students to regurgitate what they already know; (2) give students time in which to practice, make mistakes, and find out what they really mean; (3) let students question all the time; (4) let students make mistakes; (5) view all writing as work in progress; (6) do not emphasize marks or grades; and (7) be adaptable, remembering that the writing should be student centered with student learning as its main purpose. (AEA)

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WRITING IS LEARNING

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WRITING IS LEARNING

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"Students know much more than they realize they know. Teachers must draw them out."
Northrop Frye

"Language, like syphilis, tired and happiness, is what you get when you are trying to get something else"
Andrew Stibbs

"Each time she felt as though she were about to penetrate some new area of human thought. She had the sensation of standing on the verge of a shadowy vastness which might momentarily flower into a marvelous crystal of light, like a ballroom that is dark one moment, and is the next moment illuminated by the sunlike brilliance of a hundred glass chandeliers and reflecting mirrors and polished floors."
Tennessee Williams

Writing is not easy. Neither is riding a bicycle, swimming or skating. Writing is not like school math where teacher and student can agree upon an answer. It is an art. Authorities will never be in total agreement over what is correct or even best. In our own teaching careers, opinion on what is best will change.

But for too long we have looked upon writing as a science, assuming there is only one correct answer, one write/right way. And for too long we have been presuming that writing is an end in itself. The written test, for instance, has been a main method of evaluation. We start with a hundred marks and take a few away everytime something is wrong. Passing the test - writing what the examiner wanted to see - was proof that the student had learned the subject, and had learned it forever. We presumed that the only problems kids could have in writing were spelling (because they were careless), punctuation (because of ignorance or dogged individuality) or paragraphing (because they were not thinking). Writing was a mirror of how good students were. Good students had good handwriting, and few spelling, punctuation or paragraphing errors. Poor students did not. If students wrote little, they obviously knew little.

After all, all they had to do was write.

I feel this is rather like saying that all you have to do to swim is to go jump in the pool. Learning to swim starts at birth as you begin to gain confidence in yourself; and you continue to learn about yourself, and swimming, until death. That is just like writing, skating and bike riding.

Writing is but a means to an end (for all but the professional writer), a part of making oneself a whole person, of gaining knowledge by experience, of learning. And especially important for children, writing is therapeutic. When they write down their own real thoughts, they begin to understand themselves better. They

begin to learn. How often, after you have written your angry letter to whomever, and have reread it to yourself, have you felt much better about the problem, and have decided that the letter is no longer needed? Consider Alice:

> Broken families shouldn't be allowed in the world. It is very hard for the children to cope with not having any parents. Like when you go to school and get registered into the new school and are asked for parents' signatures you have to tell them you don't have any parents and then you feel really upset because memories come floating back into your head and it hurts oh so badly.
>
> When you come from a broken family it is very hard to make friends, and when you do have friends, after a couple of months bad happens, and they all get their friends to gang up on you. Growing up is a very big step to take in life, besides other things. Most times I don't like life I just feel like committing suicide but thank God I don't because I have a long life ahead of me.

There are many things that might be said about this, but I wish to make just one point about it. It is not an answer to 'What Is A Broken Family?' or 'What Happened To You Over The Weekend?', though it was prompted by both. Alice is exploring how she is feeling on that particular morning. The last sentence especially suggests how, until she has written down that she might commit suicide, she had never really looked the word straight in the face. When she sees it, she rapidly retreats because now she knows what she really thinks.

Time and time again we find professional writers saying that until they have written, they do not know what they have to say or what they want to say. Robert Duncan: 'If I write what you know, I bore you; if I write what I know I bore myself; therefore I write what I don't know'. Christopher Fry:'My trouble is I'm the kind of writer who only finds out what he is getting at by the time he's got to the end of it'. E.M.Forster: 'How do I know what I think until I see what I say?'.

Writing is a hunt, an exploration through unknown terrain by writers to find out what they are really thinking. Nobody should force the exploration, least of all that of an unsure student. But rather the hunt should be encouraged and the explorer supported, just as we sympathize with kids who fall off their bikes when they are learning to ride. Just as we commiserate with the young hockey players who shoot themselves into the net instead of the puck. Teachers are not the parents who stand at the Arena and swear at their kids everytime they do something wrong. Are they? We will, in whatever way seems best, hearten, fortify, inspire, reassure, rally, comfort, embolden, urge, instigate and advance explorations of our children's presently incomprehensible thoughts.

To help writers write, I use some ground rules which will help the difficult process whenever a writer is a work. It does not matter in which subject writers are writing. I think we would do better if we considered ourselves teachers of children, not subjects.

1.<u>We should not ask children to regurgitate what they already know.</u>

We should also not avoid regurgitation by giving all the facts

except one and asking students to fill in the blank; nor by giving correct and incorrect facts and suggesting that students pick and choose, or guess. Rather we should continually ask children to explore into their minds and to put the results of that inquiry onto paper so that we and they and anybody else can share it. The good skater is not the one who watches others skate, but the one who is out on the ice. So also, the good writer writes. There will be many falls, much ripping and rending of paper, much stomping on pens. The end result may be more difficult to appraise, but it will be infinitely more worthwhile for both writer and reader. Encourage students to explore new worlds in their writing, and discourage mindless wandering through known ground.

2. Give them time in which to practise, make mistakes, and find out what they really mean. By now you know that most kids do not put on skates and skate, or put on a swim suit and swim. So also, most do not pick up a pencil and write. The process is something like this, as suggested by Chris Worsnop: avoid - delay- postpone - procrastinate - talk - doodle - draft - leave - handinbecauseteachersaysso. Rushing kids work to a deadline is disasterous, both to their writing and to themselves. As Charlie Brown, awake at night, said:

> Napoleon talked about 'Two o'clock in the morning courage.'
> Scott Fitzgerald said: 'In the real dark night of the soul
> it is always three o'clock in the morning.'
> But when you have to get up at seven and you still haven't
> written the English theme that's due today,
> Sis-fiftynine is the worst time of day!

But how much time? You know what happens when kids have too long

to complete anything. I do not think the question is how much - only the teacher can answer that - but how will that time be controlled, what will happen to the writer during that time?

At High School level, I ask for three draft copies with ten days between the due dates of each. I use six classes for these six drafts. In the first class I explain what I need:

> For your first piece of teacher writing, you were thinking about you, the class, the school and life as it is now and may be in the next twelve months. This time you will still be thinking about yourself...I would like you to think back about seven years...to write a letter to somebody you knew then - preferably somebody you haven't seen too much of since - and retell them the most memorable events of that year. You should try to make them remember those events as clearly as you remember them now, and you should try to make them remember some things that they almost certainly have forgotten.

We go through different excercises to generate ideas and I give examples chosen from previous years' classes. The next day the kids will write their first draft, about one side long. I will read it but make no comments unless they have misunderstood the assignment. In the third class, a week later, we look at a particular revision method relevant to this piece of writing if possible, and the next day they write a second draft with two things in mind: the particular revision process and all that they have been thinking of since the first draft a week ago. When I read this draft, I ask questions on the paper whose answers I really want to know. In the fifth class another week later, writers share their work

by reading their pieces to three or four others and listen to their questions. They do not have to answer those questions, but they usually get ideas on how to make their writing more effective. This class is followed by the writing of the third draft copy which is handed in within a few days. There is usually a great difference between first and third drafts even from those who ask 'Can I just copy out what I did before?' It is amazing how writers change when they have time and opportunity to really think about what they are doing.

3.Let them question all the time. Writers should not work in silence. They should be encouraged to talk with the teacher,other students and themselves. The sharing period is designed for this, but whenever writers have something to ask, or want to read to somebody, the opportunity should be there. Writers should be continually asking 'Is this what I am really trying to say?'; 'Does it sound like me (or my imagined narrator)?'; 'Will it be understood in ways I hope this will be understood?'. From the answers - hopefully more useful than yes/no answers - new ideas will generate and new directions for the exploration will be seen. All readers (peers, teachers, parents, others) alike should be looked upon equally as coaches, friends, advisors and friendly critics.

4.Let them make mistakes. Let skaters fall down or skate with incorrect movement. Let them skate however they can best stay up, at least until they have confidence in themselves. It does not matter what colour or size paper they write on, or if they will not decide on a title until the end, or if the opening paragraph is the last

thing written. It really doesn't matter how words are spelled so long as they are recognizable. And is there a correct punctuation?

Instead, the emphasis has to be on what the writer has to say, and how effective it is when heard. The maxim found in an abandoned school house must be left there:

To err is human, to forgive is not the policy
of this classroom.

Professional writers have editors to do the heavy work on conventions because many writers find spelling difficult and stay away from what would be the most effective word because they are not sure of its spelling. What happens during the sharing class, and as a result of one writer reading another's writing, is that most non-conventions are edited out. At the end of the third draft class, I ask each writer to carefully proofread, but only at that late stage. Proofing for spelling is best done by looking at words individually. That can best be accomplished by reading from the end so that sense does not interfere with looking for correctness. I find very few non-conventions in what is handed in because of the time and care writers have put into their work.

5.<u>All writing are works in progress</u>, yea, even after the third draft. Each writing will be the best that a writer can do at that time, but that will not prevent future revision. Students are encouraged into further rewriting of their third drafts for their own personal use. This attitude of 'never complete' may help those who seek out error. They should always remind themselves that what they are reading is not the final version. Even The Bible has been continually revised since it was put together. The teacher must be careful,

however, of the opposite extreme: since this is not the final draft, it does not matter. Teachers must encourage pride in all work, not in just what is to be appraised for marks.

6. The teacher's emphasis must not be on marks. Evaluation must be of process as well as of product. Teachers must remember that school writing is not to produce great writers or great writings but to help students understand themselves as people through writing out what they think they are thinking. Since I have to come up with marks, I give one mark for handing in each of the three drafts, and one mark if the proofreading on the third draft is carried out satisfactorilly (not perfectly, but not sloppily). The remaining six marks are for the quality of the effectiveness of draft three: two marks for average, four for excellent, six for exceptional. Thus it is almost impossible for students to fail if they go through the motions carefully. My secret weapon is that I have found that students who do go through the motions improve their writing abilities over a year and so, I believe, their learning abilities and their understanding abilities.

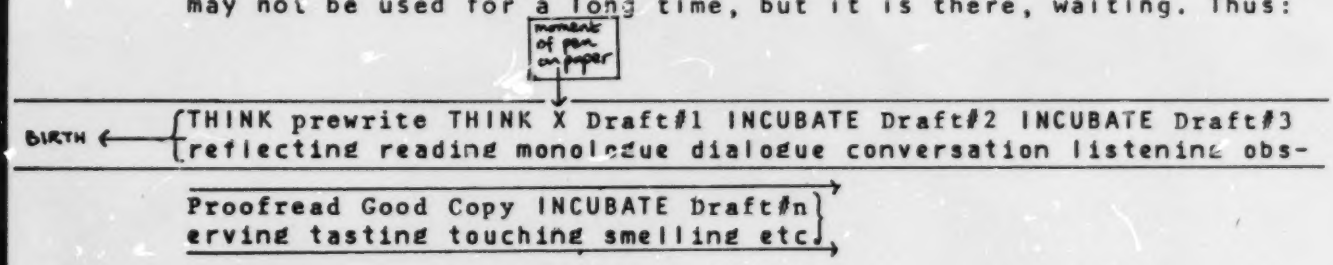
7. Be adaptable. Whatever the teacher expects, students will produce differently. But often these deviations will improve upon what the teacher thought was best. Because writing is student centered, the teacher must be very tolerant of such deviations. If they seem to be what the student needs at that time, then they must be tolerated and accepted, though the teacher should point out that the rules have not been followed.

This ground rule, of course, has its own snare. Because adaptability

is essential, any of the other ground rules may have to be adapted. But that is what makes a teacher's life exciting!

These ground rules, or adaptations of them, should help students write out their thinking so that they can share their ideas and share what they have been thinking on any topic at hand. They will not be regurgitating what the teacher or the book has said. They will show in their own words what they have assimilated and made part o their own thinking.

Can this writing process be pictured? I think it is very complicated since it starts when children start to become conscious of themselves and start to put information into their brain. That information may not be used for a long time, but it is there, waiting. Thus:


moment of pen on paper
BIRTH
THINK prewrite THINK X Draft#1 INCUBATE Draft#2 INCUBATE Draft#3
reflecting reading monologue dialogue conversation listening obs-
Proofread Good Copy INCUBATE Draft#n
erving tasting touching smelling etc

Thus what to write about should not be a major problem. Writers write about what interests them to find out more about the topic. In a school setting, teachers must be careful that they set writing topics that do interest students. Usually these are topics which are very much part of the children's world (an autobiography of your pet, advice to a younger brother) but for which they do not already know the answer (What did you do in the summer?). As the child matures, so the scope of the topics widens. Relating topics to the writer's experience is only limited by the teacher's imagination,

and it is much easier to develop topics than it is to write about them!

To repeat myself: writing is not easy unless there have been lots of prewriting experiences (which need not involve writing); and lots of time after the moment of pen-on-paper to reconsider and rewrite. Writing is one of the most important, and becomes one of the most satisfactory tasks one can do, in school or through the rest of life.